Victor Burgin

Parzival

University Library KU Leuven
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Colophon

Victor Burgin, *Parzival* (2013) is an exhibition organized and supported by the Art Committee KU Leuven in collaboration with the Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography, the Institute of Philosophy and the University Library.
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CURATOR'S STATEMENT

Hilde Van Gelder and Stéphane Symons

In commemoration of the destruction of the University Library of Louvain in 1914, the video *Parzival* (2013), created by Victor Burgin (°UK, 1941), will be screened in the University Library. This thirteen minute long piece consists of a montage of digital images of ruins and bombed out cities and audio-visual and literary material that references, amongst other works, Richard Wagner's opera *Parsifal* (premiere in 1882), Roberto Rossellini's film *Germania anno zero* (1948) and Milan Kundera's novel *Identity* (1998). *Parzival* is inspired by the period of seven months that Wagner spent in Venice (1858-1859) and it raises questions about some of the most fundamental elements in his operatic work: the longing for a savior, the complex connection between violence and catharsis, the presentiment that destruction awaits humanity in the future (*Götterdämmerung*). In an associative manner, *Parzival* brings together various artistic and political features to confront the romantic ideal of the ruin with the horrors that might result from such a myth. Still, Burgin's work movingly actualizes Parsifal's promise of universal empathy ("wisdom through pity") and it touches upon the intimate relation between human hope and the life of the child (Kundera: "It is because of the child that we attach ourselves to the world, take part in its turmoil, take its incurable stupidity seriously.").

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A note on Parzival

In 2013, the bicentennial year of the birth of Richard Wagner, I was asked by the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva, to make a work for the Geneva Wagner Festival. My work *Parzival* is the product of that commission. Richard Wagner was 32 years old when, during a stay in the spa town of Marienbad in the summer of 1845, he first read the 13th Century chivalric romance *Parzival*. He was in his mid-60s when he began writing the music for the work he would base on the tale, and he completed the full score of his opera *Parsifal* only a little over a year before his death in Venice in 1883. Some see the trace of Wagner's preceding works in *Parsifal* ; they see, for example, the figure of Tristan in Amfortas, and the Grail as a combination of Alberich's golden ring and Freia's golden apples. Wagner had initially planned that Parzival and Tristan would meet in the final act of *Tristan und Isolde*, but later abandoned the idea. During his seven-month sojurn in Venice in 1858-9 thoughts of Parzival accompanied Wagner as, having interrupted his work on *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, he brought Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* to a conclusion. In December 1858 he wrote: 'The Parzival has occupied me much: in particular a singular creation, a strangely world-demonic woman (the Grail's messenger) is dawning on me with ever greater life and fascination' – probably his first reference to the being he will later name 'Kundry'. Richard Wagner's life and works form a dauntingly massive cultural complex. I did not have the temerity to attempt a work 'about' Wagner, nor the inclination to offer another 'interpretation' of one of his works. My work for the Geneva Wagner Festival is rather a modest trace of my encounter with the Wagner complex, a representation of a psychological object: images, associations, anecdotes, auditory fragments, and so on – loosely turning around the time that Wagner spent in Venice in 1858-9, a time when 'Parzival' was no longer a medieval romance nor yet an opera, but was itself an unresolved intuition entangled in the residues of Wagner's personal, professional, political and aesthetic everyday life – an indistinct figure in a landscape, within the ruined horizon of the future *Götterdämmerung*.

One works for an imaginary audience. The circumstances of this particular commission suggested two broad classes of spectator: those with a substantial knowledge of Wagner's work, and those with an open-minded curiosity about it. I have tried to engage the first type of spectator without losing the second. The work

comprises a wall text in twelve parts and a twelve minute digital projection loop, and is structured in a literal and figurative coming and going between the optical and verbal registers of the image. In answer to the question 'where to begin?' I turned first to the plastic-imaginary aspect of Wagner's work – judging myself professionally unqualified to directly address either the musical or the literary aspects. In an article on the historic 1976 Bayreuth production of the Ring, Michel Foucault observes that whereas Wagner had wished to construct an imaginary *for* the nineteenth century, the 1976 mise-en-scène by Patrice Chéreau and the décors of Richard Peduzzi represented the imaginary *of* the nineteenth century – an imaginary that Wagner himself would have shared with Marx, Bakunin, Dickens and Jules Verne, and moreover an imaginary by which we remain profoundly marked today.[1] Probably the most celebrated of Peduzzi's sets is a décor for *Die Walküre* inspired by Arnold Böcklin's painting *Die Toteninsel*. Peduzzi's ruin became associated in my mind with other images of ruins – most notably of the ruins of Berlin in the aftermath of World War II as shown by Roberto Rossellini in his film of 1948 *Germany Year Zero*. The principle character in Rossellini's film is a twelve-year-old boy, who – again by association – came to figure the boy Parsifal as he first appears at the beginning of Wagner's opera. *Parsifal* ends with the now grown Parsifal holding the Grail aloft before the assembled knights – a scene often represented with a brilliant light streaming from the Grail. I associated this cliché image with that of the gold of the Rhine, glinting under the water at the very outset of the Ring cycle. I offer these instances as examples of the psychological processes of 'displacement' and 'condensation' (as described by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*) through which the work is structured. The ideal spectator interpellated by the work is an individual who will follow her or his own associative paths through it – a process of viewing the work that would reflect the process by which the work was made. It would have been gratuitously perverse to have responded to a request to make a work 'about' Wagner without including a citation of his music. The music on the soundtrack of my work is derived from the long orchestral Prelude to *Parsifal*, and from Kundry's monologues in Act II.

[1] Michel Foucault, 'L'imagination du XIXe siècle', *Dits et Ecrits*, tome IV texte n°286 [« L'immaginazione dell'Ottocento », *Corriere della sera*, vol. 105, no 223, 30 septembre 1980, p. 3]

Prelude

In July 1845 Richard Wagner took the waters at the Spa in Marienbad, where he read the epic narrative *Parzival* by the medieval poet Wolfram von Eschenbach. He says that this reading later prompted him to introduce the figure of Parzival into the last act of *Tristan und Isolde* : in the course of his wanderings in search of the Grail, Parzival was to appear at the bedside of the dying Tristan. The conflict between sacred and profane love incarnated in the person of Tannhäuser would here have been figured in a contrast between two individuals – Parsifal the epitome of sexual renunciation, Tristan dying for the sake of sexual love. Isolde waits impatiently for night to fall upon the castle garden where she and Tristan are to meet. When Cosima Wagner introduced *Tristan und Isolde* to Bayreuth in 1886 she commissioned designs inspired by those used for the inaugural performance of the work in Munich in 1865. Wagner's 1857 prose draft of the opera specifies 'an orchard' and a 'flowery bank' for the long duet between Isolde and her lover in the second act; a surviving drawing for the 1886 production shows something resembling a tangled wood. Kundry attempts to seduce Parsifal in a magic garden 'in which women of infernal beauty bloomed'. Wagner found his inspiration for the magician Klingsor's garden in Ravello, at the Villa Rufolo. In 2008 Waltraud Meier sang Isolde's 'Liebestod' in this garden overlooking the sea at a sunset concert given by Daniel *Barenboim*'s 'West-Eastern Divan' – a youth orchestra uniting musicians from Jewish and Arab backgrounds.

September

The Knights and Squires, guardians of the Grail, show ingratitude towards Kundry and revile her.

In July 1840, at the age of twenty-seven, unknown and poor in Paris, Wagner wrote to Giacomo Meyerbeer – the most celebrated opera composer in the French capital – to solicit his aid. The letter concluded: 'Here I am; here is the head, the heart & here are the hands of, Your property, Richard Wagner.' Meyerbeer responded by supporting him financially and by procuring stagings of Wagner's operas *Rienzi* and

Der fliegende Höllander in Dresden and Berlin. Wagner interpreted these initiatives on his behalf as a ploy to exclude his work from the Paris Opera, which alone could meet the exacting technical requirements of his staging, and he later lost no opportunity to denigrate Meyerbeer in print. The political roots of Wagner's anti-semitism are in his early association with such anti-religious 'Young Hegelians' as Karl Marx, whose *On the Jewish Question* appeared in Paris in 1844. Wagner's *Jewishness in Music* – largely directed against Meyerbeer, who is nevertheless not named – followed in 1850, and contributed to the emerging racist current in European anti-semitism. When Wagner himself achieved celebrity his sustained attacks on Meyerbeer's music contributed greatly to the decline of the latter's reputation. Meyerbeer died in 1864. On the 3rd April, 1880, Cosima Wagner wrote in her journal: 'R. slept well, but he dreams about Meyerbeer, whom he met again in a theatre and who said to him, "Yes, I know – my long nose," as if R. had been poking fun at his nose, whereupon R. more or less apologised, and the audience applauded their reconciliation.'

October

As Gurnemanz leads him to the Grail Castle, the boy Parsifal says that although he scarcely moves he seems to travel far. Gurnemanz replies: 'You see, my son, time here becomes space.'

On the 29th August 1858 Wagner saw Venice for the first time. He would stay there for the ensuing seven months. He had interrupted his work on *Der Ring des Nibelungen* to compose *Tristan und Isolde*, and was planning what would become *Parsifal*. He wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck: 'What gives my life so peculiar, almost dreamlike, a character is its utter lack of future. When I go on the water in the evening, survey the motionless and mirror bright expanse of sea, with the evening red of the sky completely wed to its reflection in the water, I have before me a faithful likeness of my present life: present, past and future are as little to be distinguished as are the sea and sky.' In Phillip K. Dick's novel *Martian Time-Slip* there is a ten-year-old boy whose apparently autistic withdrawal from the world has led to his confinement in a psychiatric hospital. We eventually learn that the space-time he inhabits is different from that occupied by those around him on the Red

Planet: where they see the present, he sees a palimpsest of present and future. What they are busy constructing, he sees as already in ruins.

November

One after another the Knights who ride against Klingsor fall victim to Kundry's powers of seduction.

On the 11th February 1883 Wagner told Cosima he had dreamt of the soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient; he said: 'All my women are now passing before my eyes.' Wagner married the actress Minna Planer in 1836, whom he tried to leave in 1850 for the married Jessie Laussot. He was in Minna's company when he first met Mathilde Wesendonck in Zurich in 1852 together with her husband Otto. Other passionate attachments to married women were to follow his unconsummated affair with Mathilde, most notably to Cosima von Bülow and Judith Gauthier. During an 1869 visit by the latter to the Wagner's villa by Lake Lucerne, Wagner pushed Cosima so violently high on a garden swing that she was near fainting and falling. When Judith intervened to avert disaster he tried to divert Cosima from her terror by rapidly climbing the side of the house 'by the aid of the shutters, the mouldings and projecting stones'. Gauthier writes: 'Trembling with anxiety, Cosima turned to me, saying under her breath: "Above all things, do not notice him; do not look surprised, or you can never tell where he will end."'

December

Parsifal sees that the world is irredeemably evil, and that he must renounce attachment to any one being in order to feel compassion for all beings.

In 1859 Wagner wrote to Mathilde: 'The other day I set my heart upon a land excursion. I wanted to go to Vicenza, but the train was leaving in the other direction, and so I arrived at Treviso. Tired out, I returned to the city of lagoons that evening, and asked myself my chief impression of this trip to the mainland. I was so melancholy at finding nothing in my memory but the dust and poor tortured horses.

I looked mournfully down on my silent Canal: 'Dust and poor wretched, tortured horses – Ah, you do not have those here – but they exist in the world.' Then I put out my lamp, and my light went out too – and dust and torment blew away.' On the 12th February 1883, while lying in bed, Cosima hears Wagner speaking to himself in an adjacent room. When she goes to him, he says: 'I was talking about Undine, the being who longed for a soul.' He then 'goes to the piano and plays the mournful theme "Rheingold! Rheingold!"' sung by the Daughters of the Rhine. Later, in bed, he says, "I feel loving toward them, these subservient creatures of the deep, with all their yearning." These are the last words in Cosima's journal. Wagner died the following afternoon. In Milan Kundera's novel *L'Identité*, a woman visits the grave of her dead son; she tells him that only her love for him compelled her to conform to a world she cannot love. Now he is gone she is free to become herself.

January

Parsifal causes the magician Klingsor's castle to collapse in ruins, and his garden to wither into a desert.

In May 1849 the 36-year-old Wagner fought on the Dresden barricades with his friend the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. Bakunin told Wagner that the builders of the new world would emerge only when the old world had been destroyed, that they must therefore find the power to 'transform the whole European world into a pile of rubble'. *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ends in the apocalyptic incineration of an old world so that a new one might be born. Wagner said he would like to build a theatre on the banks of the Rhine, perform *The Ring* cycle there on four consecutive nights, then burn the theatre down and consign his score to the flames. The Dresden Court Opera House burned to the ground in the 1849 insurrection. Dresden itself was reduced to rubble in February of 1945, and a quarter of a million people killed, in the conflagration produced by four consecutive raids by British and American bombers. In W. G. Sebald's novel *The Rings of Saturn* the writer Michael Hamburger, who was 'nine and a half' when his family left Hitler's Germany, tells of wandering through the ruins of Berlin when he returned in 1947 to search for traces of the life he had lost: 'For a few days I went about like a sleepwalker, past houses of which

only the façades were left standing, smoke-blackened brick walls and fields of rubble along the never-ending streets.'

February

Parsifal offers redemption to Kundry, who dies having received it

In November 1858 Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck: 'I woke out of a brief, but deep sleep, after long and fearful suffering such as I had never known before. I stood on the balcony, and looked down into the black depths of the Canal; a storm was raging. My leap, my fall, would have been seen by no one. I would be free of torment once I jumped, and I tightened my grip to lift myself onto the parapet.' In *Der fliegende Holländer* Wagner's heroine Senta throws herself from a cliff into the sea to save the Flying Dutchman from eternal damnation. At the end of his affair with Mathilde, Wagner wrote to his friend Franz Liszt that she had 'dared to throw herself into a sea of suffering so that she should be able to say to me "I love you"; and as a consequence I am redeemed and she is blessedly happy because she is aware of it.' The principle character in Roberto Rossellini's film of 1947 *Germany Year Zero* is a twelve-year-old boy who, at the climax of the film, having killed his father and finding no one to offer him redemption, throws himself from the top of a ruined building. The opening sequence of the film consists of a silent travelling shot through the ruins of Berlin along shattered walls and mounds of debris.

March

Parsifal reunites the disintegrating community of Knights, who now as one bow down before him as he raises the Grail before them.

In January 1895 a production of *Tannhäuser* opened at the Grand Théâtre de Genève; in the Bibliothèque musicale de la Ville de Genève is a photograph of a scene from the final act. The photograph was made for reproduction in an illustrated journal, and has been retouched by hand in an attempt to restore the theatrical illusion that the photograph had destroyed. The elements of the scene –

the singers, the stage, the painted flats and backdrop – nevertheless remain isolated from one another. Wagner sought a reunification of arts that had developed in isolation since their synthesis in Greek antiquity. He envisaged a 'music drama' that would be to a future republican Germany what the Greek drama had been to Periclean Athens: a mirror to society and a form of spiritual, intellectual and emotional bonding of individuals in a sense of community. The egalitarian dream of the European 'Springtime of the Peoples' for which Wagner fought in Dresden in 1849 remained unrealised when the formal unification of the German states was achieved in 1871. In June 1873 Cosima Wagner recorded a remark from a conversation overheard between two peasants discussing the coming Bayreuth Festspielhaus: '...what's the point in talking about it, *we'll* never go in there!' Wagner dreamed of a cultural form that would articulate the shared aspirations and values of an entire people. Leni Riefenstahl's film of 1934 *Triumph of the Will* celebrates an oligarchical appropriation of popular consciousness in which demagogy usurps democracy. Today's populist media democracies tend to impose an industrial uniformity upon what may be imagined and said, producing compliant subjects for inequitable forms of social, economic and political organisation they remain largely impotent to change.

Victor Burgin